

GIJS MOM, *Atlantic Automobility. Emergence  
and Persistence of the Car, 1895-1940.*

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When, in 2003, Gijs Mom wrote “What kind of transport history did we get? Half a century of JTH and the future of the field” in *The Journal of Transport History* and assumed the presidency of the newly founded International Association for the History of Transport, Traffic and Mobility (T<sup>2</sup>M), he made a plea for a new approach and scope of the discipline. The new approach meant a semantic change, discussing whether the term “transport” should be replaced by “mobility”, and giving greater emphasis to the role of technology, and to transnational and intermodal histories.

Gijs Mom’s 2015 book *Atlantic Automobility* is part of this disciplinary transformation. It discusses extensively the role of technology and culture in a socio-technical co-construction of the car’s diffusion and use; it is transnational by studying some North Atlantic countries; and although focused on the car, it also includes other mobility modes, thus being intermodal. The book aims at explaining the success of car diffusion, and does so in two parts, which are intended to be symmetrical: the “Emergence (1895-1918)” and the “Persistence (1918-1940)” divided in three and four chapters, respectively. Chapters 1 and 4 deal with the development of automobilism.

Chapter 1 focus on the construction of the car as an “adventure machine” that, due to its special characteristics, namely its unreliability, along with the action of users and non-users, afforded three kinds of adventures to the user culture: functional (tinkering), temporal (racing), and spatial (touring). Chapter 4 portrays the car, and motorcycles, in the interbellum period as a consumption tool for the growing middle class. It also discusses the different national diffusion patterns of motorised vehicles, and debates the “legitimation” discourse of the car as a “necessity” that coexisted with the notion of the car as a pleasure object. Chapters 2 and 6 analyse the “automotive adventure” based on “autopoetics” literary sources, and related media, such as films and songs, in three levels: the narrative content, the symbolic world, and the structural analogy or affinity between the texts and the production of automotive experiences. The seminal works of Leo Marx, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Marc Desportes, Catherine Bertho Lavenir, and Kurt Möser have inspired Mom’s approach. Chapter 2 shows how a “grammar of the automotive adventure” was developed and co-constructed the automobile culture of this early phase, by emphasizing its heavily gendered, erotic, aggressive and violent dimensions. According to the author, this grammar, namely the conquering adventure (affording a colonial gaze and an erotic experience), can only be grasped through literary sources. Along the same lines, chapter 6 uses literature to discuss the continuities in previous expressions of “automotive adventures”, and the inclusion of new elements, such as the “domestication” of the car in the context of the family, and its “transcendental” dimension when associated with a culture of flows. Chapters 3, 5, and 7 present complementary aspects to these four structural chapters. Chapter 3 portrays the transition between the two periods, explaining why the First World War was an important “catalyst” to the development of automobilism and the preparation of “the systems approach” to the car, namely the development of logistics. Chapter 5 elaborates further on the reshaping of the “automotive adventure” in the interwar period. Chapter 7 deals with the emergence of a reliable car system: how the car in the “traffic flow” started to be a matter to be treated by transnational experts, such as road and traffic engineers, city planners and accident statisticians; how other road users were excluded from the increasingly car-shaped road networks; and how trucks and buses won the “coordination crisis” although there were several protective measures regarding the railways.

The book reflects the long academic career of the author as a historian of technology, a literary historian and an automotive engineer, and is built on Mom’s previous published work. Therefore, the two main historiographical assertions—both the rejection of the explanation of the car success as an

utilitarian move and that of the American exceptionalism—are not new. What is novel is the transnational approach, its extension and ambition. But most importantly the book ground-breaking aspect is the combination of a “systemic” approach with a “psychological” or cultural approach. By focusing on motives and emotions, the book aims at historicizing what Mimi Sheller has identified in the sociological realm as “automotive emotions” (in *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2004; not quoted in the book), i.e., identifying the importance of studying emotions to explain car’s persistence. However, this new methodological and theoretical move, which can be inscribed in a kind of “cultural turn” or, although not stated, an “emotional turn”, is not favoured by the lengthy and uneven book structure, and the difficult systematisation of the subjective interpretations that this approach entails. The shortcomings of the structure could be compensated by a more complete index, in a later edition.

The book provides a synthesis not only of the author’s work but also of national historiographies on the car, its system, and artistic utterances. It mainly focuses on Dutch, American, German, French and British car cultures, although examples from Switzerland, Belgium, Austria, and Italy are mentioned occasionally. In both the introduction and the conclusion, the exclusion of the “European peripheries” to the North, East, and South is explained. The North Atlantic or Eurocentrism is the book’s major drawback. This drawback is fully acknowledged by the author. In the conclusion Mom calls for new mobility histories of both Western peripheries and Non-western cultures.